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Going viral? Maerten de Vos's "St. Michael the Archangel"

Author(s): Stephanie Porras

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# Going viral?

## Maerten de Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel*

Stephanie Porras

How do art historians describe the relation between the 1584 *St. Michael the Archangel*, designed by Maerten de Vos (1532-1603) (fig.1.) and produced in Antwerp, and the related canvas of the same subject (fig. 2) that hangs at the Iglesia de San Pedro, Lima? In standard art historical literature, the painting is termed a copy, or designated with the reflexive appellation 'Anonymous Lima painter after De Vos'. The Lima painting is clearly indebted to the

**Detail** fig. 5

DEVS · OVIS · T ·
GRANDIA SPIRANTES SVMO DE VERTICE COLLI
REX SVMVS PŒNA PRÆCIPITAVIT ACRI
Hieronymus Wierix fec.
Adrianus Haberti

1

**Hieronymus Wierix, after Maerten de Vos, *St. Michael the Archangel*, 1584,** engraving, 28.5 x 20 cm, published by Adriaen Huybrechts and Hieronymus Wierix, British Museum, London (photo © The Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, New York)

2

**Artist unknown, Lima, *St. Michael the Archangel with donor*, c. 1630,** oil on canvas, 211 x 144 cm, Iglesia de San Pedro, Lima (photo: Aaron Hyman)

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engraving, yet it also includes the figure of an indigenous elite woman in prayer before the borrowed figure of St. Michael.[1] To describe this painting as simply a 'copy' of De Vos's design fails to illuminate the political, religious, mercantile and cultural links between the Southern Netherlands and the viceroyalty of Peru that enabled De Vos's image to find purchase thousands of miles away. Both the print and the painting were produced in regions subject to Spanish rule and the zealous patronage of missionary orders of the Catholic Church. These two incarnations of De Vos's design clearly exemplify the entanglement of local, regional and global art histories, but considering the relationship between painting and print also demonstrates the complexity of the task facing art historians.

The global movement of prints like De Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel*, their transformation into various media and insertion into new contexts, necessitates a multifaceted investigation. While the focus on identifying graphic sources for art produced outside Europe has demonstrated the impact of Southern Netherlandish prints within the American viceroyalties, this approach too often flattens the contributions of the indigenous and European artists working outside of Europe, suppressing the physical mobility of prints as objects.[2] The movement of prints, as well as the structural forces and social networks that enabled this traffic of images, needs to be studied as a phenomenon beyond the iconographic migration of motifs. In his essay in this volume, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann recognizes (but does not redress) the problems with describing the 'circulation' or 'diffusion' of Netherlandish art: these terms obfuscate the role played by individuals, social networks and power structures in propelling this movement. Images, of course, did not circulate of their own agency.

For the past several decades, economic and social historians have examined the ways in which the seaborne trade of people and material objects, including artworks, bridged the geographic distance between cities like Antwerp and Lima.[3] In the field of Netherlandish art history, the pioneering work of Hans van Miegroet and Neil de Marchi has surveyed the archival records to reconstruct aspects of the art trade between Antwerp and the Spanish Americas and the mercantile networks that enabled artworks to circulate.[4] This work has exposed the social, commercial and religious ties that connect De Vos's engraving and the Lima *St. Michael*, acknowledging yet collapsing the distance between the two artworks. Scholars can trace the routes taken by De Vos's print as a physical object and commodity, as well as the social and commercial networks traversed by the engraving.

However, this approach too has its losses. This kind of macro-level analysis leaves little room for the consideration of the print itself and its (perhaps changing) functions or claims as it moved through space. Analysis of the international trade in early modern artworks suggests there was a shared visual culture between Antwerp and Lima, but the role of print in constructing that culture has been relatively uninterrogated.[5] Prints were used as part of the training of indigenous artists and as models, but print collections in Latin American also helped construct notions of *criollo* identity.[6] Part of how printed images create value is through processes of accretion: a print claims to represent and reproduce a singular design through identical multiples; print collecting makes possible a hitherto

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impossible accumulation of forms, motifs and iconographies; the same print can be used in a variety of ways by different audiences.

As a way of recapturing these aspects of the global circulation of early modern prints, I would like to test the conceptual limits of a new metaphor for this kind of information transfer: virality. While drawn from epidemiology, the phrase 'to go viral' was first utilized by *PC User Magazine* in 1989, according to the *Oxford English dictionary*, to describe the peer-to-peer marketing technique used by Macintosh computers.[7] Crucially, this use of virality in contemporary parlance reconfigures the biological notion of contagion (a disease passed on from one unknowing individual to another) to one of individual agency, as people choose to 'pass on' viral content. Stories, images, videos have to be liked and shared, as each new recipient chooses whether or not to become a forwarding agent. Information that is shared is also reconfigured: for example, a viral video on YouTube may have a circumscribed original audience (the immediate family of the subject), yet it may be picked up and shared within a larger social network (Facebook) before it is referenced in a more traditional media outlet (a network television talk show).

Today, we are awash in viral content. Cat videos, listicles and quizzes are passed between friends and acquaintances, and even traditional media outlets like the *New York Times* lists its 'most shared' articles prominently on its webpage. Once seen as the inimitable product of luck, viral content and events are now being studied as the product both of structural forces (the current dominance of Facebook as a social network) and common cultural experiences shared by a critical mass of the online public. Although it is now associated with media platforms like YouTube and Vine, the experience of virality as a visual and social phenomenon is not new. What marks the current moment is the unprecedented speed and reach of this kind of information sharing, enabled by the Internet and social media. In the early modern period, the transformative spread of images was made possible by comparable technological innovations – namely the printing press and the regular maritime cargo routes circumnavigating the globe.

The study of contemporary viral events has largely been driven by data scientists – often tied to the very corporate interests who monetize viral phenomena – and marketing researchers.[8] My own interest in virality stems from the work of Tony D. Sampson, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, scholars of digital culture and social theory, who approach virality from a sociological perspective.[9] In this essay then, I do not use virality as an ideologically loaded biological metaphor of cultural transmission. Although virality necessarily evokes the human impact of colonization and conquest, I don't wish to imply that the circulation of European prints outside Europe is freighted with the material/cultural contagion of indigenous cultures.[10] Nor do I wish to suggest the fixity of so-called European and indigenous identities, as 'uncontaminated' binaries.[11] Instead I would like to evoke virality as a social phenomenon associated with the movement of information across space and time, an occurrence experienced in various media and facilitated by new technologies.

Crucially, a consideration of early modern print's virality expands the study of the means of artistic production to a wider consideration

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of reception and dissemination.[12] The term emphasizes movement and spread, rather than binary relationships like center/periphery and original/copy. What follows therefore is an exploration of how virality may help to describe and analyze certain aspects of early modern print's mobility, testing the potential of virality as a conceptual model in animating the relationship between various *St. Michael the Archangel*s from Antwerp to Lima. This essay probes several key aspects of viral phenomena – speed and reach, copying and forwarding, the role of networks, gatekeepers and the question of agency – in each case using the De Vos design to suggest how this approach generates further questions for research.

The choice of this particular print is not accidental. De Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel* is both a handy stand-in for a much wider, well-documented phenomenon (the circulation of Southern Netherlandish prints abroad in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and an instance where scholars can, with relative ease, reconstruct something of this particular image's global reach and the speed of its circulation.[13] In addition, this engraving also suggests that Netherlandish printmakers themselves understood the viral capacity of their products, their potential adaptability to the local and the global markets for their works.

## Defining virality: Speed and reach

Virality describes both the speed and the reach of an image or event. Today that might mean a viral photo circumnavigates the globe in a matter of days, reaching millions of unique viewers on the Internet, being redescribed in traditional media (television, print) before slowly receding from newsfeeds and screens. When graphically describing the number of people exposed to a viral event over time, Nahon and Hemsley produce a distinctive sigmoid, or S-curve: first there is a slowly ascending vertical as the image/event is shared within limited social networks; then there is a 'tipping point', a steep upward climb in the number of individuals exposed to the message – when the number of people, combined with the inertia of existing patterns of diffusion, enables deep and sustained penetration of the content – before a leveling off and return to slow growth.[14]

The phrase 'tipping point' has reached its own tipping point in contemporary parlance: the journalist Malcolm Gladwell borrowed the phraseology from the fields of sociology and economics, which in turn had taken the metaphor from the realm of physics where it was used to describe the point at which a slight addition to a balance or scale would cause it to decisively swing to one side.[15] In describing viral phenomena, the precise location of any tipping point is difficult to predict or reproduce, but it usually corresponds to the adoption of content across diverse and apparently unrelated social networks. Something has 'gone viral' when it is being forwarded simultaneously by multiple agents across multiple networks. This leads to a kind of intense audience saturation that is self-perpetuating.

In the early modern period, the speed of the viral event was limited by the physical movement of objects and news from person to person, carried by horseback or sailing vessel, rather than the near instantaneous multiplication of digital content. Given that the pace of an early modern

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object's circulation was limited by corporeal rather than digital means, it seems logical to adjust how we judge 'speed' in the period to align with a similar human scale. I would suggest therefore that an early modern viral image had to reach a tipping point between a human generation and a lifetime, or approximately 50 years – with the long tail of its further distribution potentially extending much longer. A viral image then is one that was copied on a large scale by different groups within this short period of time, potentially even within the original artist's own lifetime.

In the case of the De Vos design, we know that within 15 years, the engraving had been copied several times by print publishers in the Low Countries and in Venice.[16] Roughly 50 years separate the De Vos print from the Lima painting described above, as well as several Spanish painted versions, including one by the Spanish artist Cristóbal Vela Cobo (1588-1654) (fig. 3) produced for the monastery San Jerónimo de Valparaíso in Córdoba. Seventeenth-century ivory renditions of the archangel (fig. 4) produced by East Asian artists for the export market attest to the truly global reception of this engraving.[17] This ivory St. Michael was likely made in the Philippines after De Vos's design (see the sculpted figure's correspondence to the printed saint's downward glance, his raised right hand and his elaborately knotted sleeves and boots) before travelling on the Manila galleons to New Spain.[18]

There the sculpture joined the 1581 painting (fig. 5) of the same figure, De Vos's very first iteration of the design, which predates the Antwerp engraving. De Vos's painting was in Mexico by the later 1580s.[19] I would suggest that these two objects – the 1581 painting and the seventeenth-century ivory – come from either side of *St. Michael the Archangel*'s tipping point: the painting predates the engraving that enabled the image to circulate globally, and the sculpture provides evidence of the widespread and continuous distribution of the image and its circulation across diverse geographic, commercial and religious networks. Fortuitously, these two objects are now housed a mere six miles apart in central Mexico. *St. Michael the Archangel's* tipping point then was sometime around 1630, the approximate date of the painted versions in Córdoba and Lima.

Today viral phenomena are gauged by digital measurements – clicks and likes, shares and pins – to track the speed and reach of an event or image. But how are we to measure virality in the early modern period, in the absence of such metrics? Given that we are talking about historical, material objects, subject to loss and damage, what can we extrapolate from lacunae in the material and/or archival record?[20] Tracing the various iterations of a motif across time and space depends on the image being valued and materially copied. The very material instability of paper means that prints often do not survive, whereas versions in other media are more easily traced. Complicating the picture is the fact that those objects that do survive then may attest to deep and sustained exposure to the model or they may be a one-off response. In order to determine which is the case, it is imperative that art historians take a broader view at the material and historical record.

When considering *St. Michael the Archangel* as a potentially viral image we must connect an inventory of the surviving versions and cross-reference these objects with key centers, institutions or individuals who likely forwarded the design. We must demonstrate that the design moved

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between, as well as across, diverse social networks. In the case of *St. Michael the Archangel*, the historical and material record allows for a partial reconstruction of this traffic across various networks. In the following two sections, I will explore how virality as a conceptual model helps to animate and illuminate the complex, multidirectional movement of early modern prints like *St. Michael the Archangel*.

## Copying and forwarding

The key difference between contemporary and early modern viral phenomena is in the material nature of the content and the ways in which it is forwarded. A click, perhaps a few words, is all that is needed to pass on a viral image or text, as digital code is replicated and reposted. In the *St. Michael the Archangel* examples I have gathered in this essay, we are also discussing the movement and production of copies, but ones that are

3
**Cristóbal Vela Cobo, *St. Michael the Archangel*, c. 1631,** oil on canvas, 177 x 117 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Cordoba (photo © Museo de Bellas Artes de Córdoba)

4
**Artist unknown, Hispano-Philippine, *St. Michael the Archangel*, mid-17th century,** ivory, partially polychromed and gilded, 73 x 41 cm, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Edo. de México, México, © CONCULTA - INAH - MEX, reproduced by permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History

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**Maerten de Vos, *St. Michael the Archangel*, 1581,** oil on canvas, 244 x 167.5 cm, Cuautitlán Cathedral, Mexico (photo: Aaron Hyman)

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manually produced and often in different media than the source image. Today it is possible, but not necessary, for viral phenomena to jump between media – a viral photo printed on a T-shirt, for example. In the early modern period, however, I would argue that moving between media was a crucial component of virality.

Unlike the relatively de-skilled participatory virality of contemporary social media, early modern viral images necessitated material proficiency, an ability to transform printed source material into something else. Even copying an engraving in the same technique requires reversing the design, transcribing and engraving another plate. Whereas contemporary viral culture requires digital material and Internet connectivity, early modern prints needed to reach an artist to be forwarded again and again. While a tangible and discrete object (a sandwich, a sculpture) can't go viral today unless it is transformed into a digital file, early modern prints had to be manually copied in order to go viral.

Despite this fundamental material difference in the nature of viral objects however, I would argue that the labor of copying is often rendered invisible, both in the early modern period and today. The early modern hand of the non-European copyist (as in the Limeño painting with which I began) is often anonymous, just as for most casual web browsers today the massive server infrastructure that powers the Internet and enables viral phenomena is hidden.

'Forwarding' an early modern print then can describe the physical movement of that print, carried by merchants, artists, missionaries or other individuals, as well as the active, embodied reception of that print via copying. Each version could be a distinct and unique translation of the print – but it also carried and transmitted key visual components of the design. Take for example the c. 1600 engraving of *St. Michael the Archangel* (fig. 6) published by Justus Sadeler (1572-1620) in Venice, compared to the later Lima painting, both probably done after the same or a similar model. Though the painting expands the scale, adds color and the enigmatic figure of the female donor figure, both the Venetian print and the Limeño painting retain the central pose of the angel and the spring-like tail of the hybrid devil, half man and half snake, alongside a number of smaller details. Both copies could then spawn further, recognizably similar versions.

The printed, painted and sculpted versions of *St. Michael the Archangel* also display the ways in which print was seen as a foundational tool for the learning of design principles in a variety of media. Drawing after prints had become a standard practice in the early modern workshops of painters, sculptors and metalworkers in Europe. While not as easily duplicated as the digital fabric of 0s and 1s, the graphic language of the printed image was also seen as lending itself to replication in various media. Early modern print culture and today's viral images both rely upon processes of standardization to speed the pace of artistic creation and consumption.[21]

De Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel* also demonstrates how prints utilized the names of artist, engraver, publisher and dedicatee to find broader purchase. The city of the print's origin is noticeably absent on this print, perhaps signaling via omission Antwerp's problematic geopolitical

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**Justus Sadeler, after Maerten de Vos, *St. Michael the Archangel*, c. 1600,** engraving published by Justus Sadeler, 29 x 20.5 cm, British Museum, London (photo © The Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, New York)

position at the frontline of the ongoing war between the Spanish and the Dutch. In 1584, the year the print is dated, Antwerp would be besieged by Spanish troops. In lieu of geographical origin then, the print documents a networked relationship between the individuals named on the print: the artist, De Vos; the publishers, Adriaen Huybrechts (c. 1550-after 1614) and Hieronymus Wierix (c. 1553-1619) (Wierix engraved the plate as well); and the print's Spanish dedicatee, Benito Arias Montano (1527-1598).

The implied relationship between these individuals is at first surprising. De Vos and Wierix were documented as Lutherans, De Vos in 1584 and the Wierixes in 1585/1586.[22] In addition, De Vos, Huybrechts and the Wierixes had all had a hand in the production of anti-Spanish prints during the period of Antwerp's Calvinist rule.[23] *St. Michael*'s dedication to Montano, the Spanish cleric and scholar who was currently serving as

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Philip II's royal librarian at the El Escorial palace, is a bold and somewhat unexpectedly direct appeal to the Spanish crown from these unorthodox Antwerpers.

Montano had lived in Antwerp from 1568 to 1575, assisting in the compilation and editing of the Polyglot Bible published by Christopher Plantin (c. 1520-1589). While resident in the Flemish city, Montano had formed lasting friendships with many of the city's scholars and printers, including Abraham Ortelius, Gerard Mercator, Hadrianus Junius, Johannes Goropius Becanus, Philip Galle and Plantin's son-in-law Franciscus Raphelengius. Although a Spaniard employed by the crown and likely a devout Catholic, Montanus apparently formed friendships with many of those who espoused Reformist religion and/or Dutch political resistance to Spanish rule, maintaining friendly contact with his dogmatically diverse Antwerp circle until his death.[24] When Montano was based in the Low Countries, he often acted as an intermediary, purchasing artworks for Spanish clients, including Philip II.[25] Perhaps in order for Wierix and Huybrechts to position themselves for future work on behalf of the king and the Church, the iconography of *St. Michael the Archangel* and the two other prints they produced dedicated to Montanus (a *Crucifixion* and *Mary Magdalene before the Cross*) are clearly rooted in Catholic dogma.[26] The image of St. Michael casting the devil out of heaven was one of the Counter-Reformation's most powerful symbols of the crushing of Reformist heretics – yet this image was produced by men who would likely be viewed by Catholic authorities as heretics themselves.

What are we to make of this double-speak? The design, produced by three men of Reformist background, draws its power from the very Catholic forces that would besiege Antwerp in 1584, the year the print was published. They invoke Montano's name specifically, but this kind of flexibility, a willingness to embrace both the message and the demands of a Catholic audience, anticipates the design's broader success. Perhaps De Vos knew his 1581 painting of the same subject had found favor in the Spanish orbit; certainly he drew on his own achievements in the 1570s and 1580s in courting Spanish and Catholic tastes.[27] This proven aptitude as an export artist meant that De Vos was one of the few artists in Antwerp who was wealthy enough to pay taxes in 1585, when the city fell back under Habsburg control.[28] *St. Michael the Archangel*'s dedication to Montano, a man with ties to both Antwerp print culture and the Spanish crown, points away from the documented personal beliefs of the printmakers and towards those espoused in Madrid and in Catholic territories.

Obviously the print as a product was designed to be bought and used not only by Montano, but by the widest possible commercial audience. Montano's name is used as a guarantor of the image's orthodoxy, as well as for the quality of the image, alongside De Vos and Wierix's names. Crucially, however, the inscription does not propose an original – De Vos is not described as 'inventor' on the print. The 'original' painting had in all likelihood left Antwerp by the time of the print's execution; that canvas is signed 'Mertino de Vos Antv[er]pie[n]cis Inventor et Fecit Anno 1581', referencing its origins in time and space. In contrast, the print's inscriptions – the social network evoked in the inscriptions – produce a sense of forward motion and instability.[29] The print is a collaborative production, forwarded

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**Two examples of the 'One does not simply' meme,** combining various texts and a still image from the film The Lord of the Rings. Courtesy of memegenerator.net

to Madrid at the attention of Montano, while allowing for alternative audiences. *St. Michael the Archangel* anticipates its movement in space and time, and its interpretation by diverse viewers.[30]

To stretch the viral model a moment, in this reading the De Vos print becomes like an Internet meme (see fig. 7) – a particular subset of viral phenomena that invites mimicry and adaptation. Coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, meme is a combination of the words 'mimesis' and 'gene', shortened so that it forms a syntactic parallel with 'gene'.[31] Dawkins used meme to describe any self-perpetuating unit of cultural transmission; in the age of the Internet, the word is primarily used to describe things or actions that repeat an essential format but are re-scripted or re-performed in various iterations. A meme can be a dance or action, or a phrase combined with an image. Memes are inherently multiple and invite future adaptions, as each additional iteration contributes to a meme's viral presence. Some early modern prints – like, I believe, *St. Michael the Archangel* – appear to act in a similar fashion as 'prospective images'.[32] That is, the 1584 Huybrechts print, like a meme, is a copy in search of further adaptation. The design, drawn ('figuravit') by De Vos can be redeployed by the viewer just as the print's named authors adopted Catholic imagery from their place in rebellious Antwerp.

A viral image – whether digital or analog – is not fully translated or translatable: it is sent into a new situational context, drawing its force from the accretion of social power enabled by forwarding.[33] Although the digital copy is a perfect replication of code, and the early modern viral image is a manual and often material adaptation of a design, both forms encourage adaptation. The viral image is always already moving, anticipating its forward momentum and its ability for redeployment. Today nearly every image, video or text available on the web is like-able, pin-able, share-able. De Vos and Huybrechts's *St. Michael the Archangel* contains similar evidence of its own forward momentum; the Netherlandish printmakers themselves appear to have been aware of the print's viral potential.

## Networks, gatekeepers and the question of agency

If the viral tipping point for *St. Michael the Archangel* occurred around 1630, as the image was copied and forwarded along various social networks, how can we describe and analyze this movement? Social network theory,

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the study of how individuals, groups and organizations interact with one another, has begun to be used to great effect to map the connections between Antwerp and Seville, Seville and the American viceroyalties.[34] Tracing the routes taken by *St. Michael the Archangel,* it becomes clear that these networks were not uniform webs of connection. Key individuals and subgroups provided crucial impetus and support for the dissemination of this design.

In their studies of contemporary viral phenomena, Sampson, Nahon and Hemsley all argue that contemporary and historical viral phenomena must be studied from both the 'top-down' and the 'bottom-up', maintaining that viral events are produced by the interrelation between hubs of power, individual choices and network gatekeepers, those who control access to and promote content.[35] 'Network gatekeeper' describes both systems and individuals empowered to block or encourage the sharing of particular information. Today Facebook – a corporation as well as a social network itself – is a powerful network gatekeeper, as it enforces certain rules about what content can be posted. Similarly, individuals with a large established network of followers may also be key promoters of material, exposing large numbers of people to an image or message.

In what remains of this essay, I would like to utilize Nahon and Hemsley's term 'gatekeeper' to describe key figures and organizations who enabled *St. Michael the Archangel* to go viral. The term is particularly apt in some cases as these early modern gatekeepers controlled the physical access to markets or artistic models, as in the Seville monopoly on exports to the Spanish Americas. But I don't mean to imply that gatekeepers alone produce viral phenomena. The appeal of virality as a model is that it balances a recognition of the power of gatekeepers, while allowing for contingency and individual agency. To what extent viral phenomena can be engineered or controlled by gatekeepers is the subject of considerable contemporary debate and is beyond the scope of this essay.[36] However, I think the question of agency in contemporary viral phenomena powerfully echoes the postcolonialist critique of artistic agency within a colonial system. How much agency did any artist (indigenous, creole or European) working in a colonial context actually have – particularly when such artists were often explicitly provided prints to copy? How much of our contemporary online presence is scripted by corporate interests? Virality has the potential to illuminate the tension between structural constraints and individual actions, both in the early modern period and today.

De Vos's viral image moved through space via established trade and religious networks, but it was also propelled by individual choices made by De Vos, the buyers and sellers of the resultant print and various artists, publishers and patrons. The image travelled from the Antwerp workshop of a Lutheran artist to a Catholic church in New Spain, but also to a Jesuit mission post in Lima and an ivory workshop in Asia. What networks did the image traverse, and who were the key agents and gatekeepers in this series of simultaneous, overlapping journeys?

In the case of *St. Michael the Archangel,* I would suggest that the very first gatekeepers were the publishers and art dealers who managed to exploit export markets even during Antwerp's period of Calvinist rule. One of *St.*

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*Michael the Archangel*'s publishers, Huybrechts, was also an art dealer.[37] He not only produced a print dedicated to a Spanish cleric close to Philip II, but also had the expertise and the connections to get the print out of Antwerp at a time when the estuary of the Scheldt was controlled by the Dutch rebels. It is likely that Huybrechts used the routes established by the book publisher Plantin – overland via Rouen, Nantes or Paris, or the harbors of Calais or Dunkirk – to export work to Spain and other overseas territories.[38] De Vos himself also had several familial and commercial ties to dealers involved in the export trade.[39]

Relatively soon after the publication of *St. Michael the Archangel,* Huybrechts and Wierix ceased their collaboration as publishers. Huybrechts kept possession of the copperplate of *St. Michael,* reissuing the print the same year and removing the bracket that had included Wierix's name next to his in the 'excudit'. Wierix, however, did not give up on the composition entirely, as Hieronymus went on to engrave a related St. Michael for a rival Antwerp publisher, Johannes Baptista Vrints (1535/1555-1610) in 1585. The design's popularity was such that *St. Michael the Archangel* was copied and recirculated in at least five separate editions in the next two decades.[40] The production of engraved copies necessitated some capital investment (the buying and cutting of a new copper plate and paper) and indicates there was a proven and large market for this design. The publishers of all of these copies often had ties to Antwerp, but the prints they produced often were made and sold elsewhere.[41]

Take, for example, the version of *St. Michael the Archangel* published by Justus Sadeler.[42] Justus was the son of the Antwerp printmaker Jan Sadeler (1550-1600/1608). The Sadelers had left Antwerp by 1579, working in various German cities before settling in Venice around 1596, where Justus likely produced his version of De Vos's design. The political uncertainty of the Low Countries had forced the Sadelers to leave their home city, but they often returned to Antwerp in order to buy and sell prints. While Justus Sadeler was apparently well integrated into Venetian mercantile society, his print publishing output relied heavily on Northern artists, representing two-thirds of the publisher's recorded output.[43] The selection of *St. Michael the Archangel* as a design to be copied likely relied on Sadeler's preference for Northern, Antwerp-derived designs, particularly those by De Vos (who had worked for his father back in Antwerp in the 1570s) and those with established popular audiences. In his selection of Southern Netherlandish prints to copy, Sadeler largely stuck to devotional or *naturalia* subjects; it is perhaps significant then that De Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel* combined a popular Counter-Reformation image of the saint with a particularly inventive serpentine form of the devil.

Sadeler's choice of the design, alongside several other extant early copies after Huybrechts and Wierix's print, testifies to *St. Michael the Archangel*'s evident and enduring popularity. Crucially, the Sadeler example also illustrates how the particular geopolitical climate in the Low Countries of the last decades of the sixteenth century helped catalyze the widespread circulation of such Antwerp-produced designs. Not only did prints move out of Antwerp along the export routes described above, but also a diaspora of Southern Netherlandish emigrés in the 1580s and 1590s, who settled across

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Europe, brought their own training, stylistic preferences and contacts with Antwerp graphic arts with them. *St. Michael the Archangel* was published precisely at the moment when Antwerp's print industry increasingly looked to exports and during a period of mass emigration due to effects of war and shifts in religion.

This double movement, of both people and objects, helped produced the tipping point for De Vos's design – allowing the image to move outside of its original social and trading networks rooted in Antwerp, and to be forwarded to new centers of production/distribution like the Sadeler shop in Venice. Thus we cannot speak of *St. Michael the Archangel* 'circulating' free of larger structural forces (political, religious and mercantile) and the individual preferences and choices of artists, publishers and patrons.

While the copperplate was copied and reissued in Antwerp and Venice, the prints themselves were traded, exported and imported. Given Huybrechts and Wierix's print had been dedicated to the Spaniard Montano, it is perhaps unsurprising that the most sustained evidence of the print's popularity comes from Spanish territories. The 1630 version by Cristóbal Vela Cobo produced for the monastery San Jerónimo de Valparaíso in Córdoba (fig. 3) is based on one of the engravings after De Vos's design (note the distinctive curlicue form of the serpent's tail, as opposed to the C-curve of the 1581 Cuautitlán painted version); this alongside other surviving early to mid-seventeenth-century Spanish adaptations of the composition testifies to the print's ongoing circulation in the Spanish peninsula.[44]

At the same time as this intra-European diffusion of the design, *St. Michael the Archangel* also was transported across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Recalling that Seville held the monopoly on the export of paintings and prints into Spanish America, it is unsurprising that the Southern Netherlandish print's Spanish popularity would translate into its Latin American distribution. In the summer of 1586 alone, 637 paintings were sent to the Americas from Seville; 85 of these works were of Flemish origin.[45] Between 1583 and 1599, at least 2,298 works were exported along this route.[46] The trade in books, prints and fine arts between Antwerp and Seville continued even during the war, with a robust trade resuming after the retaking of Antwerp in 1585.[47]

Viewing the circulation of *St. Michael the Archangel* not simply as a colonial phenomenon (of missionary zeal and a dependency on European exemplars) but as a wider viral phenomenon – enabled by the physical dissemination of printmakers and prints and by the concomitant shifts in taste and economic and political power – expands previous considerations of the relationship between European print and colonial copy. One should not equate the motivations of Sadeler and the other European printmakers who copied the Huybrechts/Wierix print with those of the Spanish and Latin American artists who followed De Vos's design, but neither should each be treated as completely separate. What connects the two is the reinforced cultural dominance of Antwerp as a print center, and thus the commercial appeal of De Vos's design as an exponent of Antwerp graphic art. The particular aesthetic strengths of *St. Michael the Archangel* – the grace of the saint's gesture, his elegant dress, the serpentine form of the devil with the curling tail – coupled with De Vos's inscribed name as an attributable

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marker of quality, spurred the image's momentum in both Europe and the Americas. In the Spanish orbit, it is possible that the dedication on the 1584 print also granted additional prestige.

Yet the importation of *St. Michael the Archangel* into Latin America and its circulation there represented a significant shift in the aims of the gatekeepers who mobilized the print and promoted its distribution. Commercial ties to Antwerp and the print's perceived quality remained part of its success in Latin America, but the distribution of its various iterations also testifies to the particular political, mercantile and religious networks that characterized the viceroyalties' art market. Prints in colonial Latin America, in the words of Thomas Cummins, were 'simultaneously the most democratic and oppressive of all forms of images.'[48] One cannot speak of the circulation of *St. Michael the Archangel* as solely contingent upon its aesthetic strength or even its Antwerp pedigree; crucially, the design was also embraced and promoted by key content gatekeepers in the Americas: namely religious authorities and patrons.

As has long been noted, early modern Latin American patrons often provided local artists with European prints to copy as part of their contracts with them.[49] This relationship between European, mechanically produced original and manually produced colonial copy inverts the technological schema of Walter Benjamin's oft-cited essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936).[50] This recorded practice has encouraged a view of the colonial artist's relation to the European graphic model as primarily reproductive, too often diminishing the authorial agency of the colonial artist, whether European or indigenous, in favor of the aura of the European printed original. There were many potential motivations for the selection of printed source material, depending on the prints available, the potential doctrinal or pedagogical purpose of the commission and the personal taste of the patron. Significantly, the result of this practice was the endorsement and promotion of specific designs, increasing the likelihood that these same designs would be copied again – either by related patrons or by the artist, as a way of monetizing the studio's knowledge of the compositional model. The auratic authority (in Benjamin's terms) of the printed design was then magnified via these manually produced copies – but it also imparted authority to all other versions of the design.

There are many unanswered questions in the story of the extraordinary success of the *St. Michael the Archangel* design in viceregal Latin America. The 1581 painted *St. Michael the Archangel* was in Mexico by the 1580s where it spawned its own copies, such as the painting in Oaxaca by Andrés de Concha (c. 1545-1612) (fig. 8).[51] As the painting's current location is the former Franciscan monastery of San Buenaventura in Cuautitlán, it is possible that the Franciscans, key sponsors of artistic training and patrons of the arts in the American viceroyalties, were also crucial agents in the print's later dissemination.[52] The Flemish Franciscan friar Pedro de Gante arrived in Mexico in 1523. With the support of his order, De Gante established a school for the Christian education of indigenous peoples as well as the training of local artisans in the making of European-style devotional and pedagogical artworks at the chapel of San José de Belén de los Naturales in Mexico City.

8
**Andrés de Concha, *St. Michael the Archangel*, 1582, oil on panel, 200 x 140 cm**
Oaxaca Cathedral (photo: author)

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The Franciscans of this early generation were predominantly from the Southern Netherlands, and it is likely that their taste for and access to Netherlandish graphic material helped cement the institutional taste for Antwerp designs in the viceroyalties. Later arrivals to the Americas, most notably the Jesuit order, also pointedly embraced the Antwerp graphic *koiné*, possibly in response to its established popularity in the missionary field.[53] The presence of the *St. Michael the Archangel* design in both Franciscan and Jesuit colonial churches in viceregal Latin America, then, could be evidence of these missionary orders' role as institutional gatekeepers and their mutual reinforcement of iconographic and stylistic models.

In Latin America *St. Michael the Archangel* also intersected with local demands and aesthetic concerns, which may have encouraged the further adoption of this particular design. It is possible that the specific resurgent interest in St. Michael as a subject was in part a response to local events. In 1631 an indigenous man, Diego Lazaro, beheld an apparition of the archangel at a spring in Tlaxcala, Mexico, giving birth to a new pilgrimage cult.[54] De Vos's design then could have been forwarded and appropriated by artists and audiences in New Spain interested in recalling this American appearance of the angel.

The print could also have moved between the viceroyalties of Latin America, perhaps forwarded by Franciscans or members of another religious order, as well as by merchants responsible for the intra-American trade in goods. The particular interest in the design in the viceroyalty of Peru merits further consideration: there are three extant paintings of the subject from roughly the same date (c. 1630/1640) extant in the city of Lima

9
**Bartolomé Román, *St. Michael the Archangel*, c. 1630,** oil on canvas, 190 x 147 cm, Iglesia de San Pedro, Lima (photo © Compania de Jesus, Comunidad San Pedro)

10
**Attributed to Antonio Mermejo, *St. Michael the Archangel*, c. 1630,** oil on canvas, Cathedral of Lima, Peru (photo © Museo de Arte Religioso de la Catedral de Lima)

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alone (figs. 9 and 10) – one of which was painted in Spain and shipped to the viceroyalty while the other two were probably painted locally.[55] Of these three Lima *St. Michaels*, the locally produced paintings are the closest to the printed source (see the details of costume and the serpentine devil's curling tail), indicating that both painted and printed copies of the design were circulating in the city during the first half of the seventeenth century, having traversed different social networks to reach the viceroyalty.

The Jesuits of Peru specifically promoted the cult of St. Michael and the invocation of the angels to the local indigenous populace, possibly to naturalize the transition from the indigenous worship of celestial bodies to Catholic doctrine.[56] The saint was also the patron of confraternity for Lima's indigenous masons and woodcarvers.[57] The viceroyalty of Peru had its own trading routes to Europe, as well as intra-American missionary and mercantile networks shared with New Spain. The Limeño *St. Michael the Archangel* with which I began this essay (fig. 2), contemporary to versions in Spain and New Spain, demonstrates how the design found simultaneous points of entry into the Americas, working along multiple chains of transmission. This painting, which includes an *Aymara* woman in reverence before the saint, reveals how the temporal and geographic origins of the design were superseded by its local utility: an image created for the effective intercession between an indigenous elite and the divine, as promoted by Jesuit teaching in Peru.

## Virality and translation

This essay has attempted to suggest how virality may enrich the study of both Netherlandish and non-European art. As a conceptual model for the movement and spread of printed images, virality exposes the interrelationships between successive waves of demand driven by commercial, missionary, aesthetic and devotional needs as well as individual preferences. As an image moves through time and space, its power is amplified by accretion; yet each social network traversed by the image may have its own aims in forwarding, copying and sharing that image. When an image truly goes viral, it can take on additional valences or directions – losing and/or transforming its originary or secondary context – as it is forwarded and redeployed anew. While the contemporary viral image is often understood as an immaterial, digital product, I have stressed how early modern viral images moved across and between media. De Vos's *St. Michael the Archangel* demonstrates the appeal of virality as a conceptual model, in its acknowledgment of the social and technological infrastructures, as well as the individual and contingent choices that drove early modern prints' global circulation.

Virality usefully emphasizes movement over fixidity, and multiple over binary relations in its acknowledgement of the agency of both creator and 'copyist'. Like cultural translation or the broader term 'transculturation', two now-dominant English-language metaphors for describing cultural encounters and their resultant forms, virality emphasizes cross-cultural contact as a continual process of negotiation between parties.[58] Virality describes the movement, multiplication and adaptation of images across

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networks. Unlike translation, however, virality accounts for the temporal aspects of prints' movement across space, allowing for multiple points of origin/reference, as in the case of the Limeño *St. Michael the Archangels*. While studies of cultural translation often fail to engage deeply with the social and technological infrastructures underpinning the circulation of images, virality is a model that accounts for literal and figurative notions of movement, balancing a consideration of structural constraints and individual agency, destabilizing notions of center and periphery.[59] An early modern viral image is what Alessandra Russo has called 'an untranslatable image'; not an image that is impossible to translate but one that is always being translated, in a perpetual process of creative tension and movement.[60]

Tracing the trajectories of the early modern viral image should not be seen as a singular or idiosyncratic endeavor, or even as work solely suited to scholars of non-European art, as the case of *St. Michael the Archangel* demonstrates.[61] Seeing the links between the circulation of De Vos's image from Antwerp to Madrid and Venice, from Spain to the Americas to the Philippines, enables the historian of Netherlandish art to study the resilience of the Antwerp print market around the so-called Fall of Antwerp in 1585. Reverse engineering the viral image – asking how *St. Michael the Archangel* travelled from Antwerp to Lima, interrogating the technologies, power and professional structures, social networks and individual choices that facilitated this image's dramatic movement and replication – demonstrates how the local and the global were intimately connected in the early modern world.[62]

**Notes**

1 Katzew 2011, 19, fig. 3; Gisbert 1980, fig. 105.
2 Gillet 1929; Levy 1944; Soria 1948; Soria 1952; Manrique 1982; Alcalá 1993; De Mesa 1992; Schenone 1992-2008; Bargellini 2008; Michaud & Torres Della Pina 2009. See also the ongoing work of Almerindo Ojeda and the Project on the engraved sources of Spanish colonial art (PESSCA) launched at the University of California at Davis in 2005: Ojeda 2005-.
3 See the long historiography concerning the Low Countries and the globe, traced in DaCosta Kaufmann's essay in this volume. On Flanders and Latin America, see the foundational work of Stols 1971, cat. Antwerp 1992, Bleys & Stols 1992, Thomas & Verdonk 2000 and Stols & Thomas 2009.
4 De Marchi & Van Miegroet 1999; see also Falomir 2006, Van Ginhoven 2011 and her 2015 PhD dissertation at Duke University, Thomas 2011 and Manrique Figueroa 2011.
5 Some notable exceptions are the work of colonialists; Cummins 2011, Cruz González 2008.
6 Donahue-Wallace has mined slightly later images of elites in New Spain to argue for the specific role print collecting had for these groups; Donahue-Wallace 2008.
7 *Oxford English dictionary* 2005, 'to go viral'.
8 See https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-science/the-evolution-of-memes-on-facebook/10151988334203859; Goel, Watts & Goldstein 2012; as well as various studies in the *Journal of Marketing Research* and *Marketing Science*. There is also the recent trend in popular marketing paperbacks, such as Berger 2013, which purports to distill six basic principles for viral marketing.
9 Sampson draws on the assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and the work of the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, to argue that virality is a fundamentally social phenomenon but one that relates to the distribution of biopolitical power. See Sampson 2012, 1-16.
10 Hyman 2015.
11 See the related critique of 'hybridity' in the colonial context in Dean & Leibsohn 2003 and Russo 2014.
12 In its expansion, this approach echoes Astrid Erll's definition of 'transcultural mediation', encompassing production, transmission, reception, transcultural remediation and afterlife. Erll 2014, 321.
13 A more detailed object biography of this design's global reach can be found in Porras 2016.
14 Nahon & Hemsley 2013, 22.
15 Gladwell 2000.
16 Schuckman 1996, no. 1127, lists five copies and two states of the print.
17 See the related Hispano-Philippine ivory figures of *St. Michael the Archangel* in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, inv. no. 71.490, (illustrated in Trusted 2013, 450), as well as another version of the same figure in Marcos 1984, vol. 2, 264, no. 60. Ojeda 2005-, no. 1370b, is an Indo-Portuguese tablet, also clearly based on the De Vos engraving, described as from the collection of Johanna van Nest, Alamo, California.
18 Schurz 1939; Jara 1979; Flynn & Giráldez 1995; Slack 2009. On the East Asian ivory trade in the early modern period, see cat. Pasadena 1990.
19 See the foundational study of De Vos's work in Mexico, De la Maza 1971. Elsa Arroyo has argued that the painting was part of a multi-canvas *retablo* in the Cathedral of Mexico City, in place by the 1580s, Arroyo 2015.
20 Hyman & Leibsohn 2015.
21 Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014, 250. In

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their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* on Internet memes, Nooney and Portwood-Stacer describe the predominance of certain fonts (Impact) and technologies (MS Paint) in contemporary viral phenomena as demonstrating how memes prefer simplicity and standardization in aid of propagation.

22 Wierix was purged from the Antwerp civil guard because of his beliefs in 1585/1586; Mauquoy-Hendrickx 1976, 30-33. On De Vos's Lutheranism, see Zweite 1980, 26-27, and Van Roey 1966, 107-120.

23 For example, Schuckman 1996, no. 1332, the double portrait of William of Orange and Charlotte de Bourbon from c. 1575, also likely engraved by the Wierix brothers.

24 Rekers 1972 argues Montano was a Nicodemist; more recently, Dávila Pérez 2003 has dismantled this reading.

25 Hänsel 1999, 25.

26 Clifton 2001. The others are Van Ruyven-Zeman & Leesberg 2003-2004, vol. 62, no. 690, *Christ on the Cross with Magdalene* (the third state, dated 1584, has the dedication to Montanus, but only Huybrechts's name next to the excudit); vol. 60, no. 368, *Christ on the Cross* (first state, with excudit connected by brackets to both Wierix and Huybrechts's names). Hänsel 1991, 22-23, goes as far as to suggest they were produced after the fall of Antwerp and were postdated. However, as Clifton points out, Wierix and Huybrechts worked together a fair amount in the early 1580s, and thus the original date seems more likely.

27 See, for example, the 1570 *Last Judgment* altarpiece by De Vos formerly in the Convent of Saint Augustine, Seville. De Vos also designed a number of prints depicting Virgins with Spanish appellations, such as Nuestra Señora de la Consolación, Nuestra Señora de Bellem and Nuestra Señora del Rosario, all published by Jan Baptist Vrients in the 1580s. See Schuckman 1996, nos. 732, 740, 743.

28 Van Roey 1966.

29 Van Miegroet has described this relationship between a print's attributability and the distance traversed in early modern print markets; see Van Miegroet 2008.

30 Brisman 2012 describes this as the 'epistolary mode of picture making'. I am indebted to Shira for sharing and discussing her work with me.

31 See Dawkins 1976, 192. See Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014 on how the visual characteristics of Internet memes are both a place of standardization and creativity.

32 See Shifman's description of photo-based memes as prospective in orientation, eliciting further versions. Shifman 2014, 353.

33 Here I am indebted to the discussion of distance and value in Helms 1994.

34 See, for example, Van Ginhoven 2011 or the recent volume on familial social networks and artistic production in the early modern Low Countries: Brosens, Kelchtermans & Van der Stighelen 2012.

35 Nahon & Hemsley 2013, 42, 60.

36 While Gladwell promotes what he calls 'connectors, mavens and salesmen' as key gatekeepers, this has been criticized by the sociologist Duncan Watt, who argues that unconnected individuals are just as likely to start a viral phenomenon with random interactions; see Watts 2003. Sampson's sociological model is somewhat more pessimistic, describing how we are all primed to participate in non-cognitive capitalist systems. Sampson 2012, 162.

37 Rombouts & Van Leris 1864, vol. 1, 250.

38 Voet 1969-1972, vol. 2, 436-437; Vermeylen 1999; De Marchi & Van Miegroet 1999.De Marchi & Van Miegroet 1999, 83.

39 Huybrechts was a dealer, as was Philips Lisaert, the brother of De Vos's sister Barbara's first husband. Marten Alleyns, Barbara's second husband, was also an art dealer and dealer in pigments; see Vermeylen 2012, 102, and Vermeylen 2010, 358, respectively.

40 Schuckman 1996, no. 1127.

41 On the centrality of Antwerp as a global center of art production, see DaCosta Kaufman 2004, 41-50.

42 Schuckman 1996, no. 1127d.

43 Sénéchal 1990, 28-29.

44 Other early seventeenth-century Spanish copies of the *St. Michael the Archangel* composition can be found in the Cathedral of Burgo de Osma-Ciudad de Osma and the Monasterio de San Millán de Yuso in San Millán de la Cogolla, as well as in the Colegiata in Belmonte; see Olivares Torres 2015, 31-33, and I am sure that future research will uncover more versions in the peninsula.

45 Quintana Echevarría 2000, 106.

46 González García 1988, 58; Falomir 2006; De Marchi & Van Miegroet 2006, 96-97.

47 See González García 1983 and Stols & Thomas 2009 on the book trade in this period. Sandra van Ginhoven has traced how later in the seventeenth century, the Antwerp dealer Guilliam Forchondt sold 34 paintings to Rodriguez Córtes in Seville, who assigned them to Captain Domingo de Cantabrana, who travelled to New Spain with the artworks; see Van Ginhoven 2011, 135.

48 Cummins 2011, 225.

49 Cornejo Bouroncle 1960.

50 Benjamin 1999, 214-218.

51 See also De la Maza 1971, fig. 48, in the Museo de Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

52 Cristina Cruz Gonzalez's forthcoming book (based on her doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, 2009, Landscapes of conversion. Franciscan politics and sacred objects in late colonial Mexico) will shed light on the importance of the Franciscan role in colonial Latin American artistic production. On the Franciscans and New Spain, see Rubial Garcia 1996.

53 See the term as used by Dekoninck 2014, Gutiérrez Haces 2008 and Flores Flores & Fernández Flores 2008.

54 Cuadriello 2013, 229.

55 Flores Flores & Fernández Flores 2008, 239-245. See Gisbert 1986 and Mújica Pinilla 1996 on the appeal of angels and archangels in colonial Latin America, and particularly Peru.

56 Mújica Pinilla 2013, 187; Gisbert 1986, 58.

57 Bailey 2005, 198.

58 See Burke 2009, 55-61, on the history of the term, with particular attention to the English tradition derived from early twentieth-century anthropologists Branislaw Malinowski and Edward Evans Pritchard. Cultural translation is also related to the 'Übersetzungskultur' described by Frank 1989, as well as 'la sociologie de la traduction', or actor-network-theory, developed in Callon 1986 and Latour 2005. Transculturation is described by Mignolo & Schiwy 2003, 13-15, citing Ortiz 1995 [1940] as a foundational study of this complex process. Translation is of course a tool of colonialism; recent scholarship has highlighted the key role of the Southern Netherlands as a center for the production of textual translations within the Spanish empire; see Behiels, Thomas & Pistor 2014 and Manrique & Thomas 2009.

59 Here I am echoing Greenblatt 2009; see also the foundational study by Pratt 1994.

60 See Russo's definition of 'untranslatable' in her recent study of *mestizo* art objects, like feather mosaics and graffiti, as produced and producing a perpetual process of 'never (not) translating'; Russo 2014, 6-7.

61 In a study that closely describes what

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I have called here a 'viral image', Cruz González has traced the transformation of the design by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) of the Franciscan allegory in honor of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception – an Antwerp print became part of the miraculous image cult Nuestra Señora del Pueblito. See Cruz González 2008.

62 On the shift to 'decentered' localism that recognizes global history, see Zemon Davis 2011 and Yun Casalilla 2007, with earlier literature. On the question of early modern 'globalization', see the foundational work of Flynn & Giráldez 1995, O'Rourke & Williamson 2002, Clossey 2006, McCants 2007, Lucassen & Lucassen 2009, De Vries 2010, Flood et al. 2010, Ajmar-Wollheim & Molà 2011, and Leibsohn 2011.

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